Communication tool library opens to the public at WKU

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David Horowitz August 17, 2025



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Alexander Bentley, a Western Kentucky University senior studying Biochemistry and Medical Laboratory Science with a certificate in Data Analysis, shows a Music Machine and the other rentable Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) devices now available for loan at the new WHAS Crusade for Children AAC Lending Library, located at the WKU-based Suzanne Vitale Clinical Education Complex, on Friday, Aug. 15, 2025. GRACE MCDOWELL / BOWLING GREEN DAILY NEWS

















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Scottsville 8-year-old Nathaniel Johnson, who's autistic, carries around a picture binder for when verbal communication is difficult.

A breadth of pictures and words represent things concrete and conceptual, from a photo of his school nurse, to an illustrated surprised expression that indicates something's going to change. Nearby, he gestures at an area with different-colored zones for different emotions, for when feelings are too big to express, and an illustrative board lays out different sentiments and ways to calm down: "I like them all," he says of his tools.

These aids provide a way to communicate when he can't do so verbally, his grandmother Vanessa Johnson said.

"And people are always asking, 'Why do you have these things if Nathaniel can talk well?' " said Vanessa Johnson, who was a special education teacher. "Just because he's autistic and he can talk, it doesn't mean that he can express himself the way he wants to express himself."

This style of picture-based communication tool is among the many types of rentable Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) devices available for loan at the new WHAS Crusade for Children AAC Lending Library, located at the WKU-based Suzanne Vitale Clinical Education Complex.

Whether a system using print-out pictures, or a hyperdurable, customizable speech-output tablet usable through eye gaze, the new education resource lends out more than 100 different AAC devices — 14 days at a time, open to the public, at no cost. Visits, available by appointment, primarily support people who live with neurodivergent communication differences, such as through autism, cerebral palsy, dysphasia and issues following a stroke.

"It's about giving access — making things that maybe a lot of us take for granted accessible for all kinds of individuals," said speech-language pathologist Caroline Hudson, who oversees the library. "Being able to interact and play a game with a sibling, a friend, a parent may seem pretty easy to many of us, but that can be really hard for individuals with a variety of different (…) disabilities."

Funded predominantly by a grant from the nonprofit WHAS Crusade for Children, the library aims to aid individuals and families in exploring suitable AAC tools, with professional guidance, in case they want to purchase their own elsewhere. It also provides short-term AAC assistance, as well as hands-on experience with the tools for parents, therapists, local teachers, and students in education, psychology, social work, speech-language pathology and related fields.

Such libraries with this breadth of AAC tools are a wonderful educational resource, Hudson said.

"We want them to really feel comfortable with what they're choosing," said Christina Noel, interim director at the educational complex.

Some tools for loan are adaptable toys, connected to a switch. It enables people with motor and physical limitations to play and interact, Hudson said.

"Play is a child's work," Hudson said. "By modifying toys with larger buttons or enhanced feedback or making them switch activated, barriers to play are removed."

For example, a switch-activated toy bunny can help teach pre-language skills such as cause and effect, imitation, and problem-solving to children who may not have had that opportunity with other toys. This can enable them to expand their communication abilities, according to Hudson.

Another library device, a three-dimensional electronic tic-tac-toe toy, is particularly useful for those who may have difficulty playing with pencil and paper due to motor or intellectual disabilities, Hudson said. It features game indicators such as music when a player wins — and games such as this teach skills such as rule-following, turn-taking, active listening and effective communication, Hudson added.

A no-tech communication board, similar to Nathaniel Johnson's, displays the most common vocabulary words with pictures, effective for teaching high-use vocabulary words such as "do," "go," "want" and "more." While fairly universal, the board is particularly helpful for more visual and tactile learners as well as those with communication differences or disabilities who may need language development support due to speech loss caused by injury or illness, Hudson said.

The library also lends out dynamic, high-tech speech-generating devices. Prentke Romich Company's Accent AAC device, for example, is effectively a durable tablet with a touchscreen that generates speech with different voices prompted by touch, a switch and eye gaze.

These, Hudson said, are able to store a large quantity of vocabulary, phrases and customizable features people can navigate to enhance communication independence. These are essential for people with complex communication needs, she said.

Twenty-nine-year-old Warren County resident Ben Hutchison, who is nonspeaking, uses one of these devices to output voice through touch, connected to his wheelchair. At the downtown Spencer's on a recent afternoon, he takes a sip of water and jabs a spot on the device.

"… feel mad!" it blurts out.

His mother, Leisa Hutchison, looks him over: "You don't feel mad!"

Ben Hutchison, teasing, laughs and smiles.

A medical condition, Bohring-Opitz Syndrome, causes physical and cognitive impairments such as different and longer processing, said Leisa Hutchison, a speech-language pathologist. Ben's customized AAC device, with 45 large picture icons per digital page,

allows him to place a scripted Spencer's order should he want, with a parent's assistance if needed. Recently, that device feature enabled him to tell jokes programmed into its buttons at a Parks and Rec talent show.

"He uses this AAC to give him a voice — open his thought process up to the rest of the world," Hutchison said. "Because he could be thinking things, and (you'd) never know that. No one will know how smart you are unless we give you a way to tell them and to show them."

Asked about the role his device plays, Ben Hutchison hits a button that outputs the word, "Color."

"Is he saying that having a voice gives life more color?" the reporter checks with his mother.

"Maybe," she said. "You never quite know, but goodness gracious, this helps us know so much more — about how he can be a part of the conversation."

To schedule a visit, contact 270-745-4232.

Horowitz writes for the Daily News via a partnership with Report for America.

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